

—Testimony before the Appropriations Committee on the Governor's Mid-term Adjustments
to the Budget for the State Department of Education.

February 16, 2010

Good evening, Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am here tonight to speak on the proposed State Department of Education budget in the Governor's Mid-term budget.

First I would like to say that we are very happy that there were no cuts to the School Breakfast line item. Connecticut, while still last in the nation for the number of schools serving breakfast did have an increase in the number of children eating breakfast at school. This is due to the in-classroom breakfast grants and outreach that is going on in the state – SDE is partnering with End Hunger Connecticut! and the New England Dairy Council to increase participation. However, as more children eat breakfast at school schools receive less in allocated state funding – an important source of money for many schools. So, while we appreciate that the line item is secure in the mid-term adjustments, we would like to make you aware that more funding is necessary to feed as many children as possible.

I would like to address the cuts to the Healthy Food Certification Program, or Health Food Initiative as proposed in the General Fund. In HB 5020: An Act Concerning the Budget Recommendations of the Governor Concerning Education, the language is confusing at best:

Sec. 4. Subsection (a) of section 10-215b of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective July 1, 2010*):

(a) [The] Subject to the provisions of this subsection, the State Board of Education is authorized to expend in each fiscal year an amount equal to (1) the money required pursuant to the matching requirements of [said] the federal laws governing feeding programs and shall disburse the same in accordance with said laws, and (2) ten cents per lunch served in the prior school year in accordance with said laws by any local or regional board of education, the regional vocational-technical school system or governing authority of a state charter school, interdistrict magnet school or endowed academy approved pursuant to section 10-34 that participates in the National School Lunch Program and certifies pursuant to section 10-215f that the nutrition standards established by the Department of Education pursuant to section 10-215e shall be met. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2011, the amount of the grants payable to any local or regional board of education, the regional vocational-technical school system or governing authority of a state charter school, interdistrict magnet school or endowed academy approved pursuant to section 10-34 shall be reduced proportionately if the total of such grants in such year exceeds the amount appropriated for the purposes of providing supplementary grants for meeting the nutrition standards established by the Department of Education pursuant to section 10-215e.

Currently, if schools choose to serve only healthy foods, as described by the State Department of Education, then they receive an additional \$0.10 per meal served. This national precedent has been a huge incentive for over 115 school districts to serve healthier menu items. It appears that the Governor intends to cut the additional incentive.

The Governor's recommendation will be prohibitive in continuing to serve higher quality food to students. For example, with such a decrease, Hartford Public Schools would receive \$175,000 less funding per year, causing a raise in lunch prices for families and cutting fresh fruits and vegetables- districts will be forced to go in the opposite direction as the initial program intended and families will feel the brunt. The price of food is not going down as this legislation suggests- instead they're rising, making it already very difficult for districts to stay in the black. On top of sacrificing nutritional quality, districts will be considering their financial viability in funding other vital programs such as the Summer Food Service Program that feeds thousands of children in CT each summer.

A study done by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale shows that schools that are part of the Healthy Food Certification program has better scores in teaching students about nutrition, serving healthier foods in all parts of the schools and, most importantly, is being translated to healthier nutritional choices in the student's homes.

Just last week First Lady Michelle Obama made a commitment to ending childhood obesity. Creating healthier school meals is one of the strategies. It is clear that school meals can be a catalyst for children to learn how to eat healthier – now is the time to push the option of healthier foods forward – not to take away incentives and decrease funds for those who try to help our children.

From a food security perspective, school breakfast and/or school lunch are sometimes of the only meals students of low income households receive. It's our responsibility to make them the healthiest they can be with the current financial limitations in purchasing whole and fresh foods. Nationally, studies prove that schools that remove junk food have more students partaking in school lunches and serve many more free and reduced price meals. More meals means more federal dollars AND healthier children. With the passage of the Health Foods and Beverages in Schools Act two years ago Connecticut made a public policy commitment to feed our children as healthy meals as possible, and to make schools a safe learning environment.

The very reason that the National School Lunch Program began in 1946 was as a "measure of national security" in response to the fact that many young WWII draftees were nutritionally unfit to go to war. Today this program ensures that children in the United States receive at least one healthy meal per school day guaranteeing our continued national security. During the current economic climate, it is important we stay true to this foundation by continuing to maintain and grow funding for these federal nutrition programs. Children and families need the state's support more now than ever and we have an opportunity to see this through while bringing more federal dollars into Connecticut.

Finally, if we want our children to succeed, and I believe we all do, then we must give them the tools to learn to the best of their ability. One of those tools is healthier foods – and getting the junk out of our schools. Now is absolutely NOT the time to cut this line item as it not only hurts our communities, but more importantly our children.

Thank you.